

All the Things Left Unsaid by L. Borealis

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Summary: It had been years since she had seen that look on Jim's face, but it wasn't something she could really forget. In fact, it was emblazoned on her memory like a trigger ...and she hadn't worried about the boys in at least forty-five minutes. It might have been a record. One-shot Jopper

All the Things Left Unsaid

Joyce had given into her anxiety and turned off the engine to the car fifteen minutes prior.

She was on her fourth cigarette, but her guilt only grew with each puff. What good were cigarettes anyway, she thought with annoyance, if they no longer worked to calm her down. She prayed that Will hadn't looked out the window.

Nothing had changed on the Wheeler's front stoop, which she had been watching like a hawk for the last thirty minutes. No monsters, dark clouds or government officials. Yet still, here she was.

The late July sun was just starting to set, yet the incoming night was still swelteringly hot. She hung her bare arm out of the window in an attempt to catch a bit of breeze but there was none to be had.

A rumbling engine tore around the corner in front of her. Joyce smirked. Hopper's Blazer with 'Police' emblazoned across the side was definitely going over the speed limit as it appeared on the Wheeler's street and came to an abrupt stop on the opposite curb.

"Ok, what are the rules, kid?" Hopper's voice carried out of his open window.

"I'm late! You took too long," El whined, already opening the door to her side of the car.

"Rules?" he replied gruffly.

El huffed, "Stay inside. Don't use my powers in front of anyone. Tell the Wheelers my name is Jane and I'm your niece," she stated in a glum monotone, "Can I go now?"

"Be back out here at 10, no dawdling," he said, making Joyce smile warmly at the overwhelmingly fatherly tone.

"Dawdling?" El asked.

"Oh, it'll....be your word for tomorrow. Don't be late," Hopper

replied, rubbing her messy curls with his bear paw hand, "Have fun, Kid." Joyce watched as El smiled, said goodbye, jumped out of the truck and dashed to the front door of the Wheelers so fast you'd expect she was being chased. Hopper watched her keenly the whole way, his eyes falling on Joyce, directly across the street from him, as El slipped through the doorway.

"You too, huh?" he asked from his seat as he pulled out a cigarette.

Joyce nodded and leaned her head out of the car window, "You know me. Where else would I be? I might as well build a bed for myself in the backseat of this car at this point."

Hopper snickered as he held his hands up to light his cigarette, "This parenting shit, man. It's a racket."

"Ah, but it's worth it to feel the love when they wake you up after a double shift to ask for 20 bucks," she retorted with a dark smile.

"I haven't gotten that far yet. Now I have something to look forward to," he replied. He took a deep drag from his cigarette and let out a lazy puff of smoke as silence settled between them. "Say, Joyce," he said, his voice carrying a hint of hesitation, "Wanna get some dinner? I could kill a patty melt right about now."

Joyce, surprised by the invitation, took a guilty look at the house, "Well, I should probably leave here before the Wheelers call the police on me for stalking. So, sure."

"Well, considering it would page directly to this," he said, lifting the receiver of his CB radio, "I think you're safe. Get in over here, I'll drive?"

"Okay," Joyce replied. She fumbled for her purse, leaned over and manually rolled up each of the windows, and locked up the car. She took one final anxious peek back at the Wheelers' home, which still had not burned down or fallen into an alternate dimension, and made her way to Hopper's truck.

She felt like a child as she attempted to step up into the tall cabin of the vehicle, hoisting herself forcefully, laughing in the process.

"Having some trouble?" Hopper asked with a hint of sarcasm as he held out his hand to assist her. She took it gladly and pulled herself in, yanking the door closed behind her with a loud thud. "Where to?" he asked as he put the truck in drive.

"Oh, I don't know," she stuttered, "You're the hungry one. You pick?"

Hopper nodded in acknowledgement and pulled onto the road as Joyce worked to buckle her seatbelt. She peeked over at him as he turned a corner and couldn't help but notice that he was dressed... nicely. He was sporting a pressed light blue button-up short sleeved shirt tucked into nice jeans, and his thinning hair was combed and tamed, unlike his usual hat head of flyaways.

"Something fancy happen today? You look *nice*, Hop," she said with amused surprise.

"What, a guy can't try sometimes? What do you take me for, a slob?" he responded with his patent dry humor.

She didn't respond but rolled her eyes casually and sat back into the seat.

Hopper turned right down Sycamore Lane, "So, how you been, Joyce? Don't think I've seen you since the we were chain smoking outside the Wheelers this time last month."

Joyce shrugged and worked to fill him in on the comings and goings of her and the boys. Mostly the coming and goings of the boys, to be honest. The truth was Joyce's life had been quite quiet in the nine months since everything had happened in the fall. Honestly, she'd needed it that way. But at this point she couldn't help but notice that her devotion for her kids, combined with her work schedule and her need for alone time, had turned her into a bit of a recluse, and she was admittedly going a bit stir crazy. Dinner with Hopper was probably the most exciting thing she had done without her boys all year.

After a short drive he pulled into the parking lot of Sheila's Bar and Grill on the main drag of town. "This place good?" he asked, looking over to her for approval as his fingers rested on the keys to cut the

engine. Joyce gulped. It was one of the two nicer restaurants in town. Which sure, wasn't saying much as this was Hawkins, but still. She couldn't help but feel underdressed in a ratty tank top and old jeans, her hair still pulled back in a messy pony tail from cleaning the house all day. Plus, her wallet was a lot less full than she was comfortable with for a real restaurant. Though Sheila's was only two blocks from Melvald's, she'd never stepped foot inside. It had always been just a little too expensive for her to rationalize taking the boys.

"Am I... dressed appropriately for this place?" she asked hesitantly, her eye falling on a rip in the knee of her jeans.

Hopper laughed and brushed off the question as he opened his door and cut the engine, "Don't worry about it. Of course you are. Besides, even if you were wearing a flour sack you'd be the prettiest girl in there."

Joyce felt herself blush in surprise at his words and hoisted herself out of the truck to the ground.

He opened the door of the restaurant for her and she snuck under his arm to enter. The restaurant was lively, but not packed, filled with families, middle aged couples and a couple groups of old men sharing war stories in the back submerged in a cloud of smoke.

"Evening, Shelia," Hopper called to the elderly woman behind the bar. Sheila, a sweet looking woman in her 60s with twinkling eyes, looked up from the bread baskets she was filling with a wave. Her eyes widened as she spied Joyce.

"Well, little Jimmy Hopper," she said with a kind smile as she sidled her way out from behind the bar and beckoned them to follow her to a booth by the windows. "You clean up well, Jimmy. Can't remember the last time I saw you bring a date in," she whispered quietly to Jim, though not quietly enough for Joyce to miss it, as she nudged him with her elbow like a nosy Aunt.

Joyce felt her cheeks redden in a silly way that belied her age, feeling slightly awkward by the misconception. Jim audibly groaned, "Alright, Sheila. Alright."

Sheila smiled at Joyce brightly as she laid menus on the table and patted the booth seat, "Here you go, dear. Y'all have a nice dinner," she said with a wink. Hopper stepped back to allow Joyce her choice of seats and dropped himself into the seat facing away from the door.

"This place is nice," she said as she surveyed the deep red wooden walls and ceiling.

"You've never been here before?" he asked, picking up his own menu. She shook her head. "Well then, you're in for a treat," he continued, "Sheila was my mom's best friend and she makes the best rolls you've ever tasted." He lifted the bread basket in offering.

They fell into companionable silence as they searched for their choices on the menu, Joyce munching on what was admittedly great bread all the while. After a few minutes a slight teenage girl with overwhelming Farrah Fawcett hair, who Joyce recognized from Jonathan's grade, approached their table for their order.

"I'll have the patty melt and fries," Hopper said as he handed her his menu, "and a Schlitz. Want a beer, Joyce?" he asked.

She hesitated, worried about driving later, but once again remembered she was with the Chief of Police, "Why not," she replied with a playful shrug, "and I'll have the..." she paused, realizing she had never made a decision, "Same. I'll have the same."

"Two Schlitz and two patty melts it is then," the girl said with a placating smile as she scribbled on her pad, "Be right back."

Joyce fumbled with her napkin for a moment and focused on lying it on her lap. A twinge of awkwardness pouring over her at her unexpected dinner. She looked up to find Hopper watching her closely.

"So," she said quickly, trying to change the subject from her own insecurity, "how's it going with..." she looked around and leaned in to whisper, "Jane."

Hopper nodded and took a bite out of his bread, "Well, she hasn't blown out any more windows, so I'd say it's going well. I sneak her

out of the house right about the time I can tell she can't take it anymore," he shrugged, "Only a few more weeks now and then she starts school. That's gonna be weird," he said with a nervous sigh as their beers arrived, "Thanks."

"Aww, old Dad Hopper," she teased as she patted his hand, "It'll be fine. She's a good kid, Hop. And she's got good friends who will look out for her."

"Yeah, and its ample alone time with one of those 'friends' that I'm worried about," he said with an eye roll, "Do you know that Wheeler kid showed up at her window last Saturday and tried to get her to sneak out into the woods with him? I practically had to chase him off and Jane wouldn't talk to me all day. That boy is getting too brave, I tell ya."

Joyce laughed gleefully, "If I recall correctly," she said, wagging her finger accusingly in his direction, "that sounds a lot like someone I knew who tried the exact same thing to me when we were seniors. I think my Dad had to use a broom to scoot you off of the roof, if I remember correctly."

A guilty look passed over Hopper's face as he fought back a smile. "Yeah, seniors in high school," he said wryly, "Not the same."

"Touche," She shrugged in relent as she took a swig of her beer, "She *could* do worse, by the way. I've known that boy since he was five. He might mouth off sometimes and yes, he might be a little reckless, but he's the most loyal and dedicated friend Will could have ever hoped for. He's a good kid, Hop."

Hopper sighed, "Yeah, I know. Doesn't mean I have to enjoy this."

"Well, just feel lucky that you didn't walk on your kid naked with his girlfriend last week," Joyce said, shuddering at the entirely horrifying memory that she attempted to drown with another swig of beer.

Hopper winced, "Ooooh, I do not envy you," he said with a bleak laugh.

"Well," she said, raising her glass, "At least we're in it together now."

Parenting teenagers is a trip."

Hopper shrugged and shot her his classic beleaguered smile, "Cheers to that," he said as he clinked her glass.

The evening continued on effortlessly, any awkwardness she might have felt melting away at their easy conversation and the presence of beer, much as it had always been since their first chapter as teenagers. She listened with rapt attention as he told her about renovations he was making to the old cabin and as he bragged with the sweet pride of a father about the success Jane was having with her tutoring.

"Want another?" he asked as the waitress came around with their meals.

Joyce looked down to find her glass surprisingly empty, "Oh, I shouldn't," she declined bemusedly, her head swimming a bit from the single drink. It was amazing how much of a lightweight she'd become in her forties.

"Neither should I," he replied, playing with the glass in his hands before looking up with a trademark glint in his eye, "Split one more?"

Joyce chuckled and nodded after a pause, "Sure."

"Atta girl, Joycie" he said jovially before turning to the waitress, "Just one more, thanks."

"You're a bad influence," she accused as she reached for the ketchup.

Hopper barked with a loud cracking laugh, infecting her with its suddenness as she broke out in her own giggle, "I'll take that as a compliment."

"Well, I'm not sure I meant it as one..." she retorted, "but all the same."

He shot her a coy look in response, making her insides jump nervously, surprising every nerve in her body. She blushed as she quickly forced her attention on her meal, as her mind began to run in a very unexpected direction.

Nice restaurant. Nice outfit. Combed hair. Extra round of beers. That *look he just gave her*.

No.

No way.

Maybe?

Not possible.

"So, how's work been?" Joyce asked lamely, seeking any benign topic that would help her get her bearings back as the beer arrived at the table. She swiped it immediately and took a healthy swig.

Hopper groaned and launched into a dull story about his deputies.

She didn't hear a word of it. Instead, her mind launched itself noisily into a frenetic beer fueled tizzy.

It had been years since she had seen that look on Jim Hopper's face, but it wasn't something she could really forget. In fact, it was emblazoned on her memory like a trigger.

It was the same look he would shoot her across the biology classroom every Friday of senior year. A clandestine invitation to skip fifth period for a rendezvous of cigarettes and a heated make out session underneath the bleachers.

The same look he wore when he talked her into going to prom with him despite her father's wishes, egging her on to disobey how grounded she was... because they'd been caught having a rendezvous of cigarettes and making out under the bleachers.

The same look was on his face his final night before shipping out to Vietnam, as he appeared at her window and beckoned for entry. She had let him in willingly and he had stayed all night, wrapped up silently with her body, neither of them knowing if they would ever see each other again.

And here he was, all these years later. After so much shit and so many winding roads. Sitting across from her chatting about his

daughter, his house, his town, all back at the scene of their old crimes. Giving her that *look* again.

...and she hadn't worried about the boys in at least forty-five minutes. It might have been a record.

His shirt looked incredibly good on his biceps.

"What?" Jim asked in surprise.

"Huh?" she sputtered, shaking her head, unsure of where they were in the conversation.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked in amusement.

"Oh..." she said, a twinge of embarrassment playing across her face, "No reason. Sorry,"

"Ooookay," he said, eyeing her suspiciously,

She drained the rest of the beer.

"You know you drank that whole thing," he pointed out amusedly as he pushed his plate to the side and sat back in the booth.

"Did I?" she blanched in surprise, "I'm sorry!"

"Nah, it's fine," he said as he waved his hand to dismiss her worry, "Drunk Joyce is cute. Plus, it's probably good for the town to see the Sheriff driving sober."

"Yes!" she said emphatically, "That's why I did it. I drank this beer as a service to our community!"

Hopper's laugh boomed through the restaurant, and she smiled shyly in return, entirely overwhelmed by the situation. The truth was, he'd always had that affect on her. She had always lived just a little more dangerously in his presence. It was an odd trait, she regarded through her foggy mind as she watched him laugh, because he also made her feel incredibly safe.

The check appeared at the table as his laughter subsided. Joyce

reached for her purse, but before she could rummage out any cash, the girl was already gone and Hopper was pocketing his wallet.

"My treat," he said casually as he rose up from the booth, "ready to go?"

"Hop, you didn't need to do that," she contested as she scrambled to her feet while digging in her purse for cash, "Here, let me pay you back."

"It's fine, Joyce," he said as his hand grasped her's firmly, stopping her from continuing her search in her purse. She jumped in surprise. He pulled away quickly and smiled reassuringly, "Just think of it as... prepayment for all of the Eggos you'll probably end up buying to feed my daughter once she's let loose on this town and ends up at your place after school. The girl is a monster for breakfast food."

Joyce laughed loudly as she followed him out of the restaurant, the quest for cash in her purse abandoned.

Hopper and Joyce walked to the truck in the parking lot. The night air had cooled down considerably, more than she'd expected. It was refreshing and worked to clear her mind. Hopper followed Joyce around to the passenger side of the truck. He unlocked the door and gave her a hand to hoist her up before shutting the door and crossing back to his side.

She took the five seconds of alone time to let out a huge exasperated exhale. What was happening? Her body felt hot and icy at the same time, betraying her into thinking she was seventeen again. It was... nice? Weird. Unexpected.

Hopper climbed into the truck, revved the engine, and pulled out without a word.

They drove in silence back to the Wheelers, Joyce working to calm herself, her brain and body swimming in a fuzzy intoxication.

Hopper's truck pulled up behind Joyce's car and he cut the engine. "Ahh... back in time to nervously watch the door while they overstay their curfew," he said wryly, pulling out a cigarette.

"Let 'em," Joyce said with a casual shrug, "they're only young for a few more years."

"Well, Joyce Byers," Hopper said with surprise, "If I didn't know better I'd say that beer loosened you up a bit."

Joyce just smiled, scooted closer to him in the big bank seat, and stole his cigarette, "Maybe I am."

The moments ticked by quietly as they shared a cigarette, watching the clock move closer to 10pm. Her heartbeat picked up paces consistently as their fingers mingled back and forth over the cigarette, and more so as Hopper's arm slid over the bank seat behind her, picking the cigarette from her far hand playfully when she hadn't expected it. His arm, however, did not leave the space once it had settled, and his fingers were now dangerously close to her hair. She could feel every minute movement.

The usual companionable silence that existed between them did not exist in this moment. Instead, the air felt thick, heavy and electric, as though unsaid words were floating through the air. Words that were suddenly knocking at the back of Joyce's teeth, fighting their way out of her lips and slipping through the cracks before she could stop them.

"Jim?" Joyce said suddenly, turning to him. His face was lit dimly by the street light. He looked softer than usual. Timid even. After a delayed moment he averted his eyes to the street.

"Yeah, Joyce?" he replied casually.

"Why are you dressed so nicely tonight?" she asked directly.

Hopper shrugged dismissively with a light laugh, but she could swear she saw the hint of a blush on his cheeks. He didn't respond, but merely shrugged as he took a deep puff on their cigarette.

"Well," she said after a moment, realizing she was not going to get her answer, "You look very nice."

The trace of a shy smile ghosted across his lips as he looked at her from the corner of his eye, shrugging in his trademark fashion, "Well,

you always look nice. I felt like I had to try."

Joyce smiled as her chest warmed, "What does that mean?", she asked as she shuffled in her seat, turning to him fully and finding herself closer to him in the process. He did not look at her. She swallowed hard and her voice dropped, liquid courage pushing to the point, "Did you plan this?"

Hopper let out a nervous laugh, refusing to look in her direction, "Well, I didn't think I was going to get interrogated for it but-"

"Jim," she stated quietly. He hesitated, but slowly turned to look at her after a pause. His eyes were vulnerable and nervous. "Thank you for the date," she said quietly as she allowed her body to lean back into his arm. She felt his fingers brush her hair.

"Anytime," he replied quietly.

Maybe it was the second beer or maybe it was something more, but in that moment she had no hesitation. Joyce leaned up and kissed him lightly on the lips, her right hand brushing against the tuft of his beard. It was chaste, simple and sweet. Nothing like the ravenous teenagers they had once been. Something stirred deep within her.

Hopper's eyes were wide with surprise, and a sadness laced through them that she couldn't place. He hesitated for a moment, looking directly at her as if he had just seen her for the first time. "Joyce..." he whispered slowly in his gruff tone, trepidation written across his brow, "did you mean to do that?"

Joyce's features crinkled in surprise as she laughed, "...Do you think I just fell on your face or somethi-" Her sentence ended in a breathless moan against his lips. In a flash, his eyes shifted from surprise to nervousness to unbridled longing. Before she could decipher his movement, his arms had wrapped fully around her slight frame, pulling her to him as though she weighed nothing at all. His lips were rough, unhewn. Her body flooded with a burning as she pressed deeper against his body, deeper against his lips, his large hand lacing through her fine hair as he moaned against her lips. He was still, as he'd always been, the absolute best kisser. A dam broke within her. Her hands reached around his neck as she pulled herself closer, her

kiss containing things she could not yet express with words. Things that had bubbled, unindulged, beneath the surface for months, years, and while it was nerve wracking to admit, probably decades.

He breathed deeply against her lips and brought both of his hands up to cup her face softly. "Joyce...I..." he rasped as he laid his forehead against hers, his eyes closed lightly and his breath ragged, "I've wanted to do that for so long."

A long lost insatiable smile played upon Joyce's lips, her heartbeat racing, "Then do it again, Jim."

El and Will trudged up the stairs from the basement together, audibly grumbling because they had to leave earlier than everyone else.

"I can't believe it's already ten," Will sighed.

"I know," El griped as they reached the door.

Will swung the door open and held it for El to leave first. She stepped out and crossed a few feet over the lawn before stopping wide eyed in her tracks.

"El? What's wrong?" Will asked nervously, looking at her.

El pointed silently at the truck. Will gasped, grabbed El's arm, and pulled her back inside, easing the door shut silently.

"Was that what I thought it was?!" he asked, eyes so wide they were about to fall out of his head.

El nodded slowly, her mouth still agape in shock. Will pulled El down against the door out of eye shot. She peeked up ever so slightly, parted the curtains, and peered out quickly. She swiped the curtain shut with a gasp and slid back down the door.

Will breathed heavily as she grasped onto El's arm, "My mom... and your dad..."

"Yeah!" El exclaimed in a whisper, "He combed his hair tonight. For a long time. It was weird."

They sat in silence against the door staring at each other in shock. El climbed back up and peered out of the window again. "Still happening."

"Do you think that means they'll notice if we're late?" Will said suddenly, his tone changing from shock to mischief. El looked back at him, shook her head excitedly. The two scrambled to their feet and bee-lined for the basement stairs, laughing confusedly all the while.

A/N: I had to get this off of my desktop so I can put my full focus onto writing Full Circle. Hope you enjoyed! Jopper for life, y'all.

- L -